Anneke Seley Interviews
Mark English

# The 2.0 Practice: What One Innovative Architect is Doing to Attract New Clients

*Anneke Seley, founder and CEO of Phone Works, is the coauthor of the best-selling book,* Sales 2.0: Improve Business Results Using Innovative Sales Practices and Technology*. Visit www.sales20book.com for more information, including free chapter downloads, or to read and comment on her blog. The following interview will be part of her new book on sales and marketing alignment. Look for it later this year.*

During possibly the biggest recession and housing crisis since The Great Depression, at a time when even top design firms have been laying off their entire staffs and shuttering their doors, **Mark English**, a San Francisco–based architect, has tripled his client base in the past year. In this interview, I ask Mark about the innovative "Sales 2.0" thinking that enabled his growth and talk about his experiences with new media.

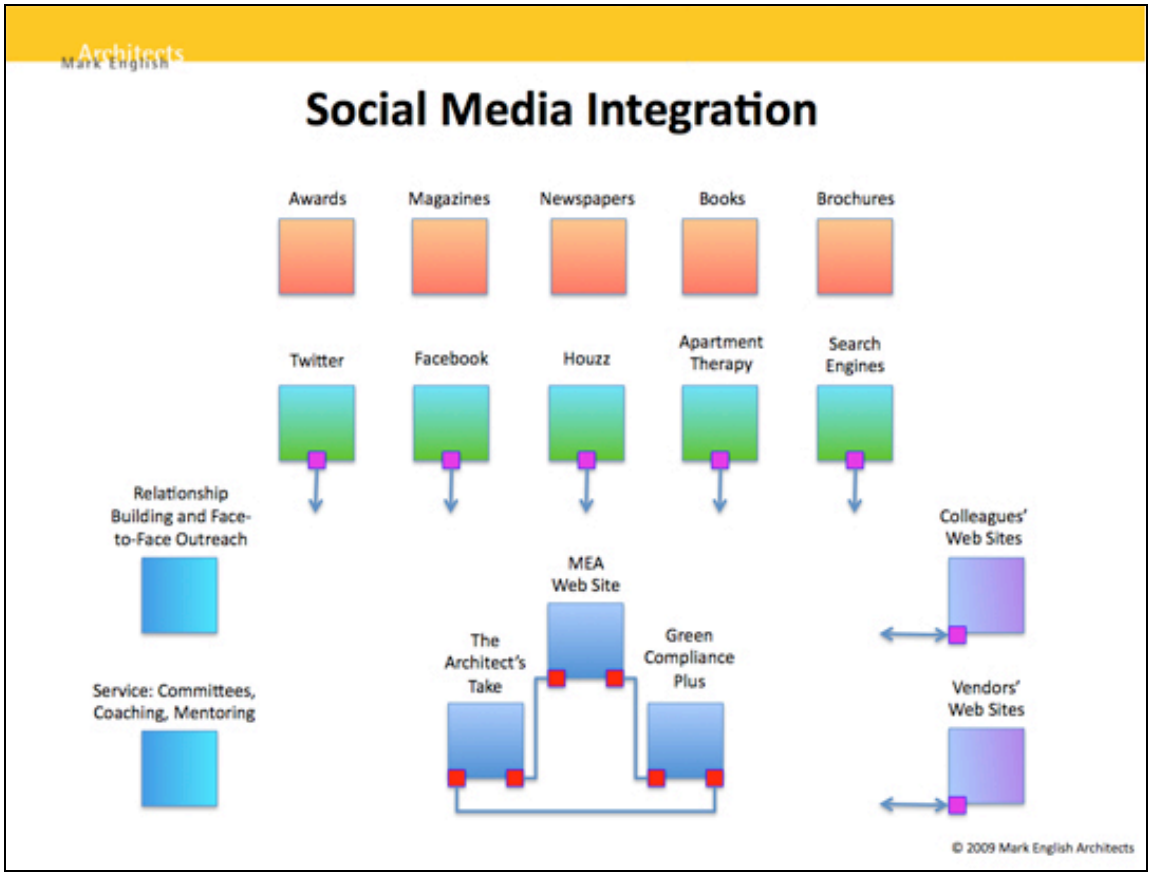
**Anneke: Tell us about the business opportunity you capitalized on this year.**

Mark: Like many business owners, I started the year wanting to grow my practice. With the help of a business consultant, though, I came to the conclusion that a lot of the work we do is not scalable. But I also realized we had a unique opportunity. When I started my business in 1992, it was a lot like today's economic climate. I started doing energy and structural calculations for other architects just to get through the recession. The energy compliance work was boring, specialized and tedious — but unavoidable, just like taxes. My energy compliance work (known as "Title 24"), which leads to repeat business several times a year, was my ticket to growth during a slow economy.

**Anneke: When you came to the realization that energy compliance work could drive your business growth, what was your experience level with social media and social networking?**

Mark: A year ago, I had no clue what Facebook and Twitter were, or how I might use them for business purposes. I had to have someone sit me down and physically take me through them. At that time, we had 15–20 clients on the energy compliance side of the business, without any active marketing. The goal was to get to several hundred clients using social media.

Here's a picture of how I integrated social media into my traditional marketing:




**Anneke: So how do you use social media sites for business benefit?**

Mark: We looked at what would differentiate us from other architects out there. We were ahead of the curve in recognizing we needed a website as a way to advertise and present our services online. We then started putting out newsletters in PDF format. People liked that; we got a couple hundred subscribers. Then we decided to do a blog that talked about our services but was attractive for other reasons. That became "Green Compliance Plus," which has two main goals:

1. Provide Title 24 energy compliance documentation tailored to the specific needs of architects and other design professionals
2. Foster education and discussion on energy compliance and green residential design concepts within the design and engineering communities

We made a strategic decision to create all original content, which we felt would be more valuable than reposting other people's content. Without Rebecca Firestone, my writer and business content developer, none of this would be possible.

**Anneke: Tell me about the content.**

Mark: We started interviewing. We included conversations with green builders; suppliers of energy-efficient heat, power and lighting systems; solar companies; lots of people in the green industries.

**Anneke: How did you drive people to your blog?**

Mark: We started cold calling architects who were our prospects. Many of them subscribed to the blog right away. After that, we started doing lunch meetings. Of 100 people we invited, 50 would respond and have lunch with us. Sometimes it took several months to schedule. Eighty percent of those lunch meetings turned into a sale. And every time we post to the blog site, we send an e-mail link to our subscribers. This way, we stay on top of everyone's mind.

**Anneke: Are you using a system to track your contacts? How does it help you win business?**

Mark: We have everything in salesforce.com. There's not much work out there right now for residential or commercial architecture, but we have these new clients on the energy side. They hire us for small jobs, which the system helps us track, and as the economy improves, there will be more. The system helps us stay in touch with customers and produce recurring revenue.

**Anneke: You have another blog, as well, right? How did that come about?**

Mark: On the architecture side, we created "The Architect's Take." The genesis for that came from my experience as the building architect for the Metropolitan Homes Showcase in June 2009. I met a few of San Francisco's top architects working on that project and realized I needed to find a way to get to know the others to increase my visibility in the architecture community. I decided to do a second blog featuring architects we like. We interview them about themselves, not just their work. As an architect, I want to know what makes someone tick. "The Architect's Take" blog is a way for me to access well-known architects without barriers. No one has turned us down for an interview yet. From a professional point of view, this gives us a much higher profile with our peers in San

Francisco. That kind of visibility can lead to awards, jury invitations and other opportunities.

**Anneke: How, exactly, do blogs and Twitter generate prospects for you?**

Mark: We have three sites: our main website, our "Green Compliance Plus" blog and our "Architect's Take" blog, and they all work together. We use WordPress as our blog tool, and it has an automatic Twitter engine. Whenever we post something, it sends out a Tweet (Twitter post). The Tweet shows up on a follower's computer or mobile phone, they click on it, and it takes them to the original blog article. We find people retweeting (reposting) our tweets to their own networks, which expands our audience exponentially. I'm also using design blog sites such as houzz, which is an online portfolio for architects and designers. You upload photos of your work, and people can sift through the content visually. We get 12%–15% of the flow to our website from houzz.com, and it has already provided several work opportunities for us outside San Francisco. There's another one called Apartment Therapy that's really big. That also drives traffic to our sites.

**Anneke: What have the business results been?**

Mark: We've tripled our client base. There's no way to do that in this economic environment without the support of the blog sites. They give us credibility and a competitive advantage. Very few architects are doing this. Some may be on the Web or have a blog site, but they don't update them very often, or they're doing reposts of existing content. We're providing high-quality content and case studies of actual clients. The case studies are documented proofs of concept that give us credibility and plausibility. They show our value to clients and prospects.

**Anneke: What is the volume of opportunities coming from Twitter, and how do you track it?**

Mark: Through Google analytics, we can see what comes from Twitter. Twitter provides 20%–25% of the flow to our blog sites. I'm at 2,500–2,600 followers, and adding 100–120 a week.

**Anneke: Where are your Twitter followers coming from?**

Mark: Mostly from other networks. One article on the "Green Compliance Plus" blog site was immediately retweeted 20 times to 11 other networks. I got 50 new followers from that. Companies we interview often include a link to our blog posts on their websites. In one case, we got 500 hits right away, and the post still generates 5–10 visits per day. I also use the Tweet Adder engine to search and follow other prospects we might be targeting. A large percentage of them follow me back. Twitter has become extremely useful. I get a lot of e-mails from Twitter followers.

**Anneke: So in addition to your own blogs and social media, you're also following other people's content and retweeting the information you believe your prospects will find valuable. How do you have time for all that on top of running your business?**

Mark: During the week, I get to the office a little early and spend maybe 15–20 minutes finding articles of interest on other sites such as CNet Green Technology, the Contemporist and houzz. I tweet those, and many of them get retweeted. Every e-mail I send includes links to our website, blogs, and my Twitter and Facebook links.

**Anneke: You spoke at an AIA (American Institute of Architects) event on Dec. 4, 2009, with two other panelists who use social media in their practices. What did you learn from them?**

Mark: Mike Plotnick from HOK spoke about using blogs to personalize client experiences and develop internal esprit de corps with a giant multinational company. He stressed that designers and planners within HOK have willingly signed up to participate on his blogging team — even though writing blog posts is in addition to their regular jobs, and they do it on their own time. He also talked about how he, a self-described "traditional PR guy," had to give up control to embrace new media. The firm launched its social initiative in mid-2008 as part of a recruiting strategy to present a young, hip, cool, creative vibe to attract the right talent. This was during a time when, unlike today, there was a limited number of candidates looking for jobs. Mike also said there was initially no formal mandate to blog; they simply starting experimenting on the sly. He does very little to control what his team blogs about. The only rules are, "nothing illegal, unethical, controversial or confidential."

Joel Robare, a designer who runs JR Studio, told the audience something completely different: He abandoned his blog in favor of Twitter, when he realized he was pushing content out to no avail. He claims his clients don't have time to read long posts, and favor the faster, more immediate information exchange Twitter provides. Joel said he posts 5–10 times per day, which he writes all at once in the morning while he is microwaving his breakfast, using a tool called TweetFunnel. His posts fall into three categories:

1. What is going on in the market
2. His own insights
3. Advertising for his business (no more than once every 15–20 tweets)

Joel checks where his prospects are spending their time online by entering their e-mail addresses into a product called Spokio. And he predicts video blogging will be the next big thing.

**Anneke: After the panel spoke, someone challenged you by asking how many decision makers have the time to read blogs, and follow Twitter or Facebook streams. How did you answer that question?**

Mark: I gently suggested he think outside the box and look beyond a direct cause and effect. I can track specific, measurable business results to my new marketing approaches. But it goes beyond that: I am building awareness and reaching an international audience at an extremely low cost. This, in addition to my pedigree, leads to credibility and trust. People in my field now recognize my name. That's worth a lot. There is no doubt in my mind that my activities are increasing revenue and profitability.